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# ORIENTATIONS

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The David A. Cofrin Asian Art Wing at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida



# Before Tomorrow: Excavating the Past, Building the Future in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's future is being painted in the darkest of colours: failed state, civil war, collapse of political institutions. Yet hope still prevails. Despite thirty years of war, violence, poverty and suffering, millions of Afghans across the country work with pride and commitment, moving slowly but steadily towards a future they firmly believe will be better than today. This determination is based on the conviction that they can rebuild their country, and their belief in this future is based on the sense of pride regarding the accomplishments of the past.

The motto of the Kabul Museum is 'A country stays alive whose culture and history stay alive' (see Deborah Klimburg-Salter, 'Twice Buried, Twice Found: Treasures of the Kabul Museum', in *Orientalism*, January/February 2006, pp. 86-92). For its members and those of the country's

other cultural institutions, their work is an essential component of the country's post-conflict reconstruction and a powerful tool for national integration. An important dynamic in this process is the fact that the Afghans have always shown pride in the material culture of their long history, including the pre-Islamic eras, without assigning ethnic attributions to the historic achievements of their ancestors.

In 2006, the Kabul Museum was an empty shell. On 15 March 2011, a renovated museum opened the exhibition 'Along the Silk Road – Recent Excavations from Mes Aynak' – showcasing its first newly formed collection in thirty years. The event is noteworthy both for the process that culminated in this exhibit and for the extraordinary quality of the objects on display. Objects from other excavations under way in the country are also exhibited in the museum, but it is Mes Aynak, an important archaeological site south of Kabul, that has yielded the most spectacular results so far (see Joanie Meharry, 'The Mes Aynak Address', in *Orientalism*, March 2011, pp. 182-83).

Across Asia during the colonial period, museums and other cultural institutions were founded following European models. Consequently, the choices of what would be excavated and preserved were conditioned by

foreign perspectives. Archaeological missions were typically led by foreign teams with local participation, the objects being divided at the end of the mission between their respective national museums.

The Kabul Museum was formed at the beginning of the 20th century, with the present building opening as a museum in 1931. Unlike many of its regional counterparts, however, and although based on a European model, the Kabul Museum grew out of the private collections of the country's kings Habibullah (r. 1901-19) and Amanullah (r. 1919-29). By the 1990s, the world-famous collections had expanded to about 100,000 objects, mostly from international archaeological excavations.

Today, the reconstruction of the physical museum is paralleled by the evolution of the institution's structures to reflect a more distinctively Afghan character. Afghanistan has repeatedly been invaded and even occupied but never colonized, and this sense of its independent identity encourages us to envision a 'tomorrow' in which the country's institutions will reflect indigenous goals and values in



Omara Khan Masoudi, Director of the Kabul Museum (fifth from left, standing), Mohammad Nader Rassouli, Director of Archaeology at the Ministry of Information and Culture (third from left, standing) and Deborah Klimburg-Salter (second from left, seated), pictured with six curators of the Mes Aynak exhibit – Farhad Sediqq, Mohammad Atiq Hamdard, Ajmal Yar, Rahimulah Amani, Shazia Hamdard and Nasrin Balali – the Vienna team and other colleagues at the International Conference of the European Association of South Asian Archaeology and Art, Vienna, July 2010



Detail of a recently excavated Buddhist statue at Mes Aynak, showing an attendant figure (Photography by Deborah Klimburg-Salter)

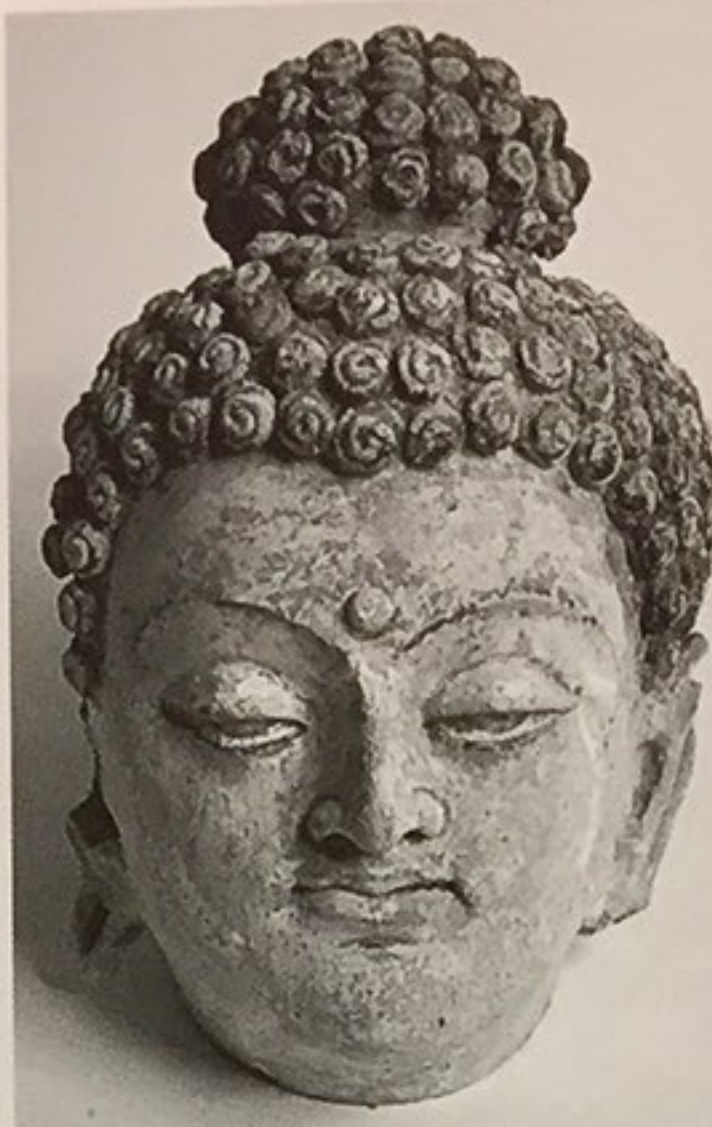


harmony with modern social principles.

The Kabul Museum, for example, has always had an Afghan staff, but now for the first time, all personnel are also Afghan trained. In the face of enormous challenges and building on a legacy of sacrifice and commitment to the rescue and preservation of their country's heritage, the exceptional director, Omara Khan Masoudi, is determined to achieve a global standard of museum administration (see Klimburg-Salter, *op. cit.*). To implement this ambitious programme, Masoudi has developed a relatively flat hierarchy and a consensus style of decision making – a management model that is both traditionally Afghan and completely contemporary. The director has also welcomed support from the outside. Specialists from many nations already collaborate in most sections of the museum. And the seven curators of the Mes Aynak exhibit, recent graduates in archaeology, have continued their studies in a programme organized for them beginning in 2008 by CIRDIS (Center for Interdisciplinary Research and Documentation of Inner and South Asian Cultural History) at the University of Vienna.

The Mes Aynak mission, meanwhile, is also an Afghan-led initiative. Excavation is being conducted by The Afghan Institute of Archaeology under M. N. Rasouli, in collaboration with the *Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan*, directed by Philippe Marquis. Additional funding is provided by the World Bank and the US government. This multi-national effort is coordinated by Vice Minister Omar Sultan on behalf of the Ministry of Information and Culture – to which both the Institute of Archaeology and the Kabul Museum belong.

The hope is that Afghans and the global public would be able to learn more about the forgotten cultures from the past both by experiencing the individual treasures in the museum, and by learning about the lives and the cultural topography (farming, trading, civil systems, religious customs) through



Buddha head  
Excavated from Mes Aynak,  
Afghanistan, 6th/7th century  
Kabul Museum  
(Image courtesy of and © Kabul Museum)

educational presentations at a heritage site. But this will not happen – at least not at Mes Aynak – if it is destroyed. According to current plans, copper mining will begin at this location within the next two years, ending any further archaeological exploration.

Mes Aynak is both a significant potential source for mineral extraction and a site of exceptional archaeological value (see Meharry, *op. cit.*). The challenge is how to achieve a balance: to maximize the possibilities offered by both resources – mineral and cultural – for the benefit of the Afghan people, preserving the current positive evolution of Afghan institutions and international collaboration in the face of disparate goals.

The rich copper vein has been known and worked for millennia and, as can be seen from the material remains, was the source of tremendous wealth in earlier periods.

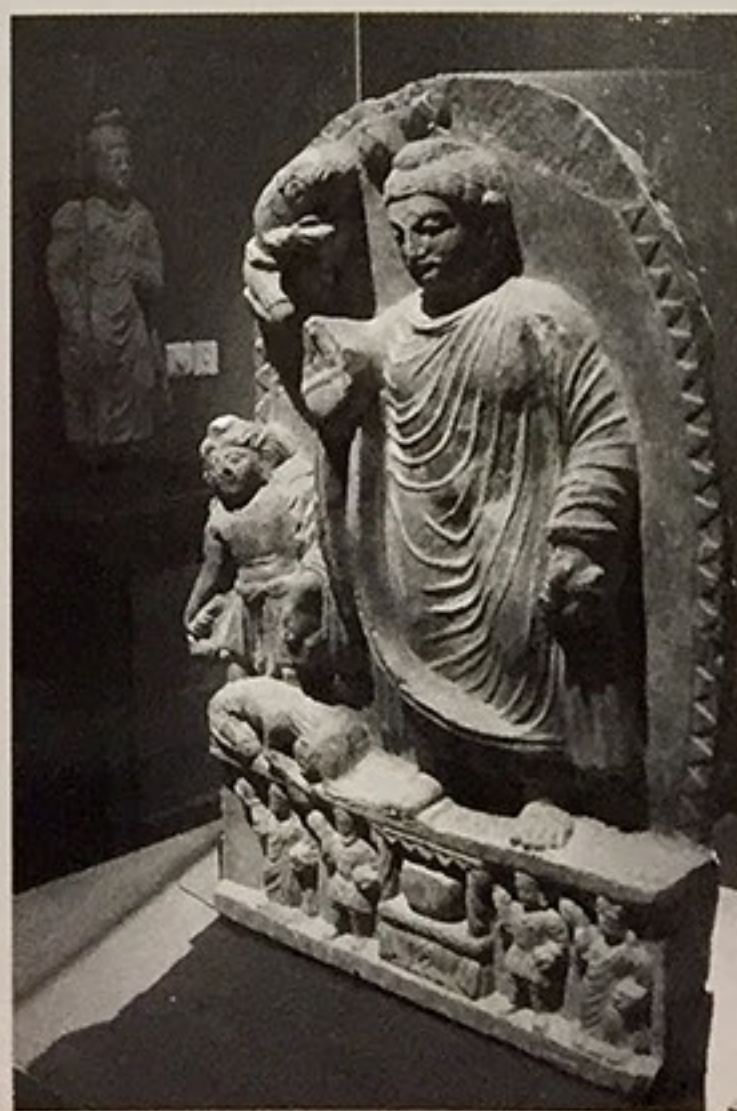
The Logar valley, with its natural resources, fertile land and proximity to transnational trade routes, possessed all the prerequisites for the creation of a flourishing society.

It is only a small step to see that in the future, as in the past, the exploitation of these minerals could benefit the entire nation. Herein lies the dilemma: how to maximize the possibilities offered by both resources – mineral and cultural – for the benefit of the Afghan people. The real danger is the loss of balance, apparent in the current solutions. Numerous media reports have already expressed this concern. A prudent response would be to provide greater transparency, allowing the interested public to remain informed about the unfolding fate of this unique locale.

Mes Aynak represents an unprecedented opportunity to create a model whereby the exquisite artistic and architectural treasures – and the buried information from more than 4,000 years of Afghanistan's history – can be preserved, not just in a museum but within their context, permitting the citizens of today and tomorrow to understand their history and their evolving culture. At the same time, the country could help pioneer a method of archaeologically responsible mining for the constructive management of sites where valuable natural resources and cultural treasures are co-located, providing an international model for positive collaboration between private enterprise, governments, and national and international experts from the fields of engineering, cultural preservation and development.

In short, the most satisfactory outcome will be one that simultaneously allows private enterprise to mine the abundant natural resources, enables Afghanistan to obtain badly needed revenue and infrastructure, and preserves a site of inestimable value for present and future generations.

Deborah Klimburg-Salter is Professor of Asian Art History at the University of Vienna. Cheryl Benard is an analyst with the RAND Corporation and Director of the non-profit The Bamiyan Project. Both have been involved in research in Afghanistan and in cultural and educational projects since the early 1970s.



View of the exhibition 'Mes Aynak: Recent Excavations along the Silk Road' at Kabul Museum, showing a Buddha figure in the foreground  
(Image courtesy of and © Kabul Museum)